

# Retracing the route taken by Robert Brown and company in a portion of the Flinders Ranges

R. Grandison

44 Mataro Rd, Hope Valley, South Australia, Australia 5090

On 9 March 1802, HMS *Investigator* came to anchor in Spencer Gulf, just a little south of present day Red Cliff Point. Next morning two parties prepared to leave ship for further exploration. Flinders was to take a longboat further into the gulf, while Robert Brown, his assistant Peter Good, landscape artist William Westall, botanical artist Ferdinand Bauer and three attendants, John Allen, the 'practical miner' (Vallenee & Moore 1982, p.4), Brown's servant Porter, and Westall's servant White (name uncertain; Vallenee, pers. comm. 1988) were to go ashore and climb mountain 'X'. This hill, on the eastern side of the Gulf, was the highest in the immediate range and Flinders later named it Mt Brown.

In his diary entry of 10 March, Brown<sup>1</sup> stated:

Before 6 o'clock set off for the highest mountain in the chain which bore N by E 30° of the ship and whose base we supposed to be not more than 5 miles from the beach.

As it turned out both parties badly misjudged distance in this landscape and were to spend an uncomfortable night in a strange environment.

Brown's party came ashore on the beach just south of present day Chinaman Creek (Cooper 1955). Beyond the beach where they landed the area is boggy salt-marsh for several kilometres, and no doubt this was time-consuming to traverse. The salt water and mud would not have been a good start for feet about to undertake a long walk and then ascend a mountain range. A straight line distance of 22 km lies between the landing beach and Woolundunga at the base of the hills. Besides the difficulty of the salt-marshes a wide area of dissected alluvial fans, with a number of deep but dry creek crossings, had to be negotiated. All this had to be accomplished before the steep ascent could begin. In his journal Brown said that they reached the hills by 2 o'clock.<sup>2</sup> Assuming they were ashore by 7 o'clock this means that they had been walking for about seven hours.

Peter Good's diary (Edwards 1981) informs us that, almost immediately upon reaching the hills, one of the attendants was so exhausted and footsore that he was returned to an area in the creek where there were signs of water. Apparently, in the expectation that water would be acquired on the hill, no detailed investigation was made at the time of the area to which the attendant was sent. The month of March is usually the driest time of the year in this area. Unwittingly they were setting themselves up for a difficult time; their own supplies of water were limited.

Good recorded that the ascent had not proceeded far when another man had to be sent back to the creek to

re recuperate. In the late afternoon the remainder of the party struggled to the summit of Mt Brown. From here they would have seen the *Investigator* anchored in the gulf, the peak, of what Eyre was to later name Mt Remarkable, to the south, and the gradual merging of the hills with the Willochra Plain in the east. Mt Arden would have been most noticeable to the north, and to the west a mixture of plains, mesas and the swampy limits of the head of Spencer's Gulf would have stretched before them.

Considering the effort to gain the summit any view must have been disappointingly short due to fading light. More importantly, the party did not find any water and an attempt was made to descend to a more favourable spot. Following a steady, downhill scramble through low scrub, the group found itself in a dry gully but still well within the range. After an uncomfortable night, reported by both Brown and Good in their diaries, they set off next morning to rejoin the two men who had been left at the foot of the hills.

Good recorded that the servants left behind had found a spring and been warmed through the night by a fire. The water alleviated the thirst of the incoming party members and plants were gathered at this locality.<sup>3</sup> Brown recorded that they had joined the servants by 7 o'clock and he related how:

A little before 8 o'clock we left the water and about 4 o'clock reached the beach opposite to the ship — all exhausted with fatigue, the heat of the day and want of water. About 5 p.m. got on board.<sup>1</sup>

## Retracing the route

To determine the specific route taken by Brown and his party I have carried out field investigations to compare today's terrain with that described in the diaries of Brown and Good. Westall's sketch (Fig. 1; Perry & Simpson 1962, pl. 23) of the area was also examined. The following observations have been made:

a) the only source of naturally occurring permanent water in the area is at Woolundunga Spring (D. Herde, pers. comm.);

b) the pointed hill marked 'a' on Westall's field sketch (Fig. 1) is Saltia Hill;

e) Brown's description 'of a reddish argillaceous stone angular fragments of which interspersed with fragments of quartz, weathered [schistus?] containing thin veins of a metallic substance resembling Molybdena of black lead', reasonably corresponds with samples of micaceous hematite found in a localized portion of the Woolundunga Ridge. Shale, with dendrites, and the fault breccia were found on the ridge at the head of Catninga Gully.<sup>4</sup> The remaining hills toward the summit consist of quartz.



Fig. 1. Westall, William 1781–1850. Spencer's Gulf: a view at the head of the Gulf, South Australia. Pencil sketch: 18 x 26.8 cm. National Library of Australia.

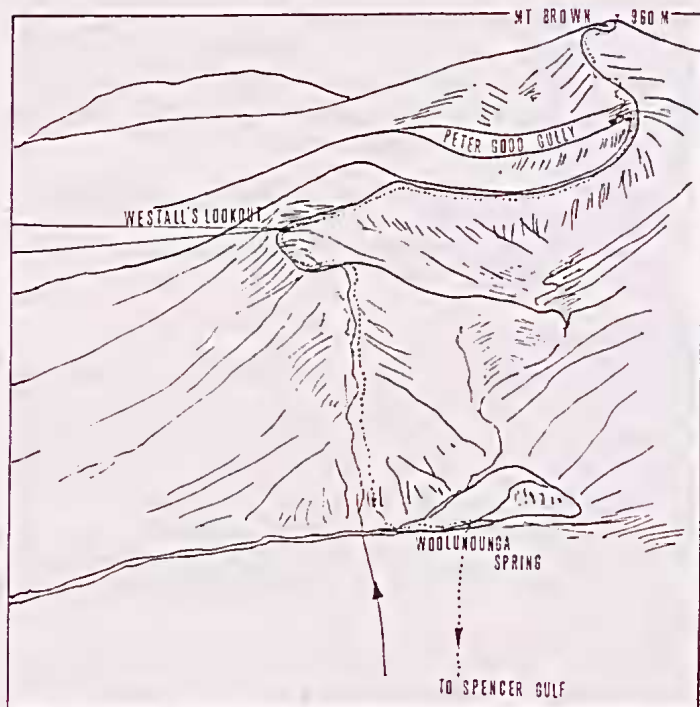


Fig. 2. Field sketch showing the route taken by Brown and company in the Flinders Ranges.

From this evidence it is thought that the ascent started from near Woolundunga Spring.<sup>5</sup> The Woolundunga Ridge and the head of Catninga Gully were then followed to the summit. Under the circumstances of their hurried twilight retreat the most likely site for

their overnight camp is Peter Good gully<sup>6</sup>, which lies immediately to the east of, and runs parallel with, Catninga Gully. In the morning a quick scramble up the side and over into Catninga Gully, then up the other side to gain the ridge, would have put them well on the way for a speedy return along Woolundunga Ridge.

My investigations suggest that Westall made his sketch (Fig. 1) during the descent on the morning of 11 March. When the site was revisited in April 1988 the features displayed in Westall's sketch were only clearly evident a few minutes after sunrise, and at a point I have referred to as 'Westall's Lookout' in Fig. 2.

#### Acknowledgements

Prof. Tom Vallance kindly assisted with this project. The sketch by William Westall was reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Australia.

#### Notes

1. Typescript of a part of Brown's diary were received from Prof. T. Vallance, University of Sydney. The original diary is housed at the British Museum (Natural History).
2. Reference to time in Brown's diary suggests the use of 138° E longitude of GMT for this position. This proves to be 18 minutes behind CST as used in South Australia today. Therefore, when Brown uses 2 o'clock it would correspond to 2.18 p.m. CST.
3. Recorded in Good's diary. It seems likely that specimens of *Psoralea australasica* Schdl. were gathered here. A duplicate specimen in AD, recently acquired from BM, only has the general label 'Spencer Gulf Bay XII March 11th 1802' — which is typical of many of Brown's collections (Stearn 1960). The duplicate is of a

flowering specimen, which suggests that it was growing close to the spring.

4. Specimens of any rocks that may have been gathered in this area have not been seen. Any that were gathered were presumably on the HMS *Porpoise* which was used to transport much of the natural history collection back to England after HMS *Investigator* was left in an unseaworthy condition at Sydney. Unfortunately the *Porpoise* sank after it struck a reef in Queensland waters on 18 August 1803 (Vallance & Moore 1982).
5. See 'Wilmington' topographic map, 1:50,000, for localities.
6. Officially named in *South Australian Govt Gaz.* 24 March 1988.

## References

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